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Few countries have a shape that is easier to remember than Italy's. The Italian peninsula looks just like a boot kicking a ball. What's the ball? It is the neighboring island of Sicily. But that's not the best part. Can you guess which sport is Italy's national sport? That's right--soccer.

Is it a coincidence that this boot-shape country is home to soccer, called *il calcio* in Italian, as its national pastime? No. Italians love soccer. For some Italians, watching soccer is like breathing. Soccer became popular in the 1930s, when Mussolini, Italy's prime minister, believed that a great Italian soccer team would be a source of national pride. Mussolini had many soccer stadiums built and teams formed in Italy, and the sport's popularity followed.

Italian children start playing soccer in school yards, public squares, and quiet streets at an early age. Many children dream of playing in one of Italy's soccer leagues. Some of the best teams are SS Lazio, AS Roma, AC Milan, Juventus, and AC Fiorentina. But soccer appeals to many Italians, not just young dreamers. In fact, Italy's current prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, owns AC Milan.

Some of the world's best soccer players are Italian. International soccer star Roberto Baggio calls Italy home. Italy has won the World Cup three times--in 1934, 1938, and 1982. Italy has made it to the World Cup finals at least ten times, and in 1990 it hosted the event.

Italians take their soccer very seriously. After a victory, fans will sing songs, wave flags, and take the celebration out into the streets. Sometimes after a win, fans will rush onto the field and even hug and kiss the players. But a team's losses can make the fans angry. When the national team came home from their 1986 World Cup defeat, fans met the players at the airport. They weren't there to offer them support or soothe their wounds. The angry fans were there to boo them!

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